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SUBJECT: MUTED FIRST REACTIONS TO NEWS OF A SECOND ROUND

11. (U) Summary: Initial public and official reactions to the October 20 announcement of a a run-off election between President Hamid Karzai and Abdullah Abdullah are initially muted. Hitherto, widespread opposition cited the insecurity and seeming illogic of a runoff; responses now are predictably mixed, ranging from supportive to opposed, but closest to skeptically resigned. We have seen no indication of vigorous negative public reaction; in fact, the same kinds of groups who opposed a runoff with protests in the recent past are now promising to come out and vote. End Summary.

12. (SBU) A pre-election snapshot in war-torn central Logar province captures the mood the day before the announcement, when PRT military and civilian officers walked through the Pul-e-Alam market. None of the twenty individuals the officers spoke with favored a run-off, regardless of whether they had voted on August 20; exasperation was the common sentiment. Comments included:

-- This country has become a political boxing ring. One round was enough.

-- If 10% of the registered voters turn out for a runoff, we should all dance for joy.

-- These elections are giving us a headache. It's taking too long to decide a run off. Participation will be much lower, but I will take part.

-- The money for a second round would better be spent on the people.

-- Karzai had 54% of the vote until the international community said it needed a better partner and remarkably his vote count has dropped to 47%. See how bad this looks?

-- I have to risk my life to vote AGAIN?

13. (U) After the October 20 announcement, BBC's Pashto Service interviewed four or five local people from Kabul city. Most said they found the second round unacceptable and did not believe a run-off to be in the best interest of Afghanistan. Dari Radio Killid also interviewed a small number of Kabulites. All said they would definitely vote in the next round, even if it meant risk to their personal safety. (Note: Although this may not sound like much of sample, it is worth keeping in mind that radio is still the primary news medium in Afghanistan and influences public perception more broadly than either newspapers or TV.)

14. (U) Editorials in Kabul dailies have not been overly enthusiastic about the runoff. Three of five - Cheragh (independent), Hewad (state-run), Hasht-e-Sobh (independent), Weesa (privately-owned), and Daily Afghanistan (independent) - accused 'foreign control' of being at work. However, even Weesa said that although "our people have been betrayed" Afghans should turn out in record numbers to vote. Weesa also reported that people in the southern provinces of Helmand, Uruzgan, Zabul, Kandahar, Paktiya, and Ghazni are requesting the Independent Election Commission (IEC) issue

new voting cards because the Taliban had either intimidated them into throwing them away or had confiscated them.

¶5. (U) The independent Daily Afghanistan focused on the logistical challenges inherent in this second round, while independent Hasht-e-Sobh commended President Karzai for his decision and urged that the election be held as transparently as possible. State-run daily Hewad played the Pashtun card, missing the point that fraudulent votes had no one behind them, saying, "Foreigners demonstrated their power in these elections. But, we wish they had demonstrated this power in the fight against terrorism rather than against the votes of people. What is very surprising is that nearly one million of the 1,300,000 votes nullified were cast in south, meaning these votes were cast by Pashtuns. This is an insult to the people of the south."

¶6. (SBU) A local Afghan driver told us what we have heard many times, namely that the majority of poor Afghans do not care who wins this election; they just want an end to it. Afghan researchers at a respected civil organization, the Afghan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU), told us they agreed with some of the criticism in the press and on television concerning "foreign interference" in the election. They voiced concerns about a "unity" government, commenting that any sharing of power will devolve into a power grab that would exacerbate ethnic tensions and result in more, not less, corruption and abuse of government. According to these researchers, even people disenchanted with Karzai do not think Abdullah will reach across ethnic lines as Karzai has done. Regarding turnout, they believe it will be harder to get people to vote this time around, but think people will

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ultimately vote. When queried why reaction to the announcement seems so muted, the researchers echoed the Kabul driver: The people are resigned; they want it to be over; and Afghans still look to their leaders to tell them how to react. Left to themselves, the people will not demonstrate in the streets.

¶7. (SBU) In Abdullah Abdullah's October 21 press conference, he thanked Karzai for accepting the results and stressed the need to guarantee the transparency and security of the run-off election. He alluded to changes he will propose to the IEC. We later learned that Abdullah might ask the international community to replace IEC members Ludin and Najafi with two 'impartial' people since they are widely seen as pro-Karzai.

¶8. (U) The Free and Fair Elections Foundation of Afghanistan (FEFA), the leading Afghan civil society elections observer group, issued a statement welcoming the assessment of the Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC), supporting the run-off, and candidates' acceptance of that, and expressing confidence that the fraud investigation and resulting run-off will ultimately help restore people's trust in the process and their government.

¶9. (SBU) Some official Pashtun reaction has been predictably negative, but hopeful signs suggest that the emotional intensity surrounding these events may dissipate and officials will turn to getting out the vote. Shukria Barakzai, an outspoken Pashtun MP from Kandahar told Radio Azadi that a run-off is unfair, unjust, and had been decided as a result of political pressure. Barakzai was one of 40 mostly Pashtun MP's who urged President Karzai as late as the morning of October 20 not to accept a second round. By October 21, while still blaming the international community for pushing a second round despite Karzai's obvious first-round win, Barakzai was telling us in private that Karzai might get even more votes in the run-off as Pashtuns would probably rally round him out of sympathy and solidarity.

¶10. (U) According to Pajhwok Afghan News Agency Pashtun

tribal elders in Kandahar said they will support Karzai and would respect the decision of the IEC. Ironically, we are likely to see the same groups that recently were demonstrating against a second round get instructed to bring out the vote.

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